

The Best Christmas Eve



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A few years ago, Bill Lederer wrote to the Chief of Naval Operations in Washington, D.C. about a sailor who emulated the Christ, reaching out one Christmas Eve as one who would be Santa.

He recalled: Last year at Christmas time my wife, our three boys and I were in France, on our way from Paris to Nice in a rented car. For five wretched days everything had gone wrong. On Christmas Eve, when we checked into our hotel in Nice, there was no Christmas spirit in our hearts.

It was raining and cold when we went out to eat. We found a drab little restaurant shoddily decorated for the holiday. Only five tables were occupied. There were two German couples, two French families, and an American sailor.

While eating, he was writing a letter. My wife ordered our meal in French. The waiter brought us the wrong thing. I scolded my wife for being stupid.

Then, at the table with the French family on our left, the father slapped one of his children for some minor infraction and the boy began to cry.

On our right, the German wife began berating her husband.

All of us were interrupted by an unpleasant blast of cold air.

Through the front door came an old flower woman. She wore a dripping, tattered overcoat, and shuffled in on wet, rundown shoes. She went from one table to the other.

"Flowers, Monsieur? Only one franc." No one bought any.

Wearily she sat down at a table between the sailor and us.

To the waiter she said, "A bowl of soup. I haven't sold a flower all afternoon." To the piano player she said hoarsely, "Can you imagine, Joseph, soup on Christmas Eve?"

He pointed to his empty "tipping plate."

The young sailor finished his meal and got up. Putting on his coat, he walked over to the flower woman's table.

"Happy Christmas," he said, smiling and picking out two corsages. "How much are they?"

"Two francs, Monsieur."

Pressing one of the small corsages flat, he put it into the letter he had written, then handed the woman a 20-franc note.

"I don't have change, Monsieur," she said. "I'll get some from the waiter."

"No, Ma'am," said the sailor, leaning over and kissing the ancient cheek. "This is my Christmas present to you."

Then he came to our table, holding the other corsage in front of him. "Sir," he said to me, "may I have permission to present these flowers to your beautiful daughter?"

In one quick motion he gave my wife the corsage, wished us a Merry Christmas and departed. Everyone had stopped eating. Everyone had been watching the sailor.

A few seconds later Christmas exploded throughout the restaurant like a bomb.

The old flower woman jumped up, waving the 20-franc note, shouted to the piano player, "Joseph, my Christmas present! And you shall have half so you can have a feast too."

The piano player began to belt out Good King Wenceslas.

My wife waved her corsage in time to the music. She appeared 20 years younger. She began to sing, and our three sons joined her, bellowing with enthusiasm.

"Gut! Gut!" shouted the Germans. They began singing in German.

The waiter embraced the flower woman. Waving their arms, they sang in French.

The Frenchman who had slapped the boy beat rhythm with his fork against a glass. The lad, now on his lap, sang in a youthful soprano.

A few hours earlier 18 people had been having a miserable evening. It ended up being the happiest, the very best Christmas Eve they had ever experienced.

(told by James E. Faust, Christmas Dev., Dec. 6, 1998)

Lesson: A Seemingly Small Act can Have a Big Effect